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The Real Shultz?

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In public as in private life, nastiness defines the character of its perpetrator. So we are reminded by the Gelb affair: the State Department's attack on Leslie H. Gelb of The New York Times.

In Washington the episode is evidently being treated as a case of petty tyranny by one cranky official, or as a bad joke. But it is not petty and not funny. It gives us ugly insights into the state of mind of the people who hold power in this country today. And it raises painful questions about the Secretary of State.

Leslie Gelb is a colleague and friend of mine. But it is not just my opinion that he is one of the country's outstanding chroniclers and analysts of national security affairs. His hallmarks are care and an eye for the larger meaning of events — characteristics in evidence when, last month, he wrote about U.S. contingency plans to deploy nuclear depth charges in Canada, Iceland, Bermuda and Puerto Rico.

The information had already been published in those countries, and had led to sharp public debate. Mr. Gelb's article put the matter in military and political context. It emphasized that the President had not approved the plans and that the other Governments, though they did not know before the news broke, would have to approve before any actual deployment.

Mr. Gelb undertook to limit the facts to what had appeared abroad, omitting other, sensitive material. President Reagan's national security adviser, Robert C. McFarlane, directed the State Department to cooperate with Mr. Gelb on the story. Mr. McFarlane and Secretary of State Shultz asked the editors of The Times to withhold the story; the editors declined, noting that others knew all about it and that only Americans were not informed.

Despite that history of care and confidential exchange with officials, Mr. Gelb was subjected to an extraordinary attack after the story appeared. It came from Lieut. Gen. John T. Chain Jr., director of the State Department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs — a job that Mr. Gelb held from 1977 to 1979.

General Chain said the article "impacts on our national security capability." He forbade his staff to talk with Mr. Gelb. He had Mr. Gelb's picture removed from a wall where it had hung along with pictures of other past directors. In the frame he put a sign saying, "Removed for Cause. The P.M. Director, 1977 to 1979, did willingly, willfully, and knowingly publish, in 1985, classified information the release of which is harmful and damaging to the country."

A few days later General Chain lifted the order against his staff talking to Mr. Gelb. He also removed the sign from the picture frame, but he did not replace the picture. And he reiterated his grave charge against Mr. Gelb.

It is easy to dismiss General Chain as someone with the gravitas of a petulant 3-year-old. But what he did — what he is still doing — cannot be so easily dismissed. He has used the weight of office to bring what amounts to a charge of treason, without due process or any kind of law, against a person of demonstrated patriotism and thoughtfulness.

General Chain reflects something much larger: the zealotry that seethes inside the Reagan Administration. Taking a picture off the wall is a perfect symbol of it. Those pictures in Washington offices show that, in America, government rises above party. Or did until the offices were taken over by people who know there is only one right answer to everything — and who want to dictate The Truth to the press.

Gelb affair raises hard questions

It is one thing to ask the press to withhold a story, as Presidents and others have done before now. It is quite another to call a reporter a traitor when his paper rejects the request. Many times in our history publication has helped, not harmed, national security. But the Reagan people, uninterested in history, want unchallengeable power.

Where is George Shultz in all this? He came to office with a reputation as a man of quiet dignity and nonideological conservatism, but lately he has been sounding shriller every day. And in the Gelb affair he has come across as either a zealot himself or a man too weak to challenge the bullies.

Mr. Shultz has said nothing about General Chain's degrading performance. His spokesman, Bernard Kalb, said bureau chiefs decide such things on their own — so "the Secretary accordingly supports" the general.

There is only one decent way out of this affair, and George Shultz must know it. That is to apologize to Leslie Gelb and instruct everyone in the State Department to stay out of the smear business. □